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## The Significance of the Frontier in American Historiography: a Review Essay

Paula M. Nelson

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# The Significance of the Frontier in American Historiography: A Review Essay

PAULA M. NELSON

*The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and Plains*, by Glenda Riley. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988. vii, 299 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical note, index. \$25.00 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

*Far From Home: Families of the Westward Journey*, by Lillian Schlissel, Byrd Gibbens, and Elizabeth Hampsten. Foreword by Robert Coles. New York: Schocken Books, 1989. v, 264 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$19.95 cloth.

*Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier*, by Elliott West. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989. vii, 334 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.50 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

This year marks the one-hundredth anniversary of the official close of the American frontier. In 1890 the United States Census Bureau, in a humble document titled "Extra Census Bulletin No. 2," noted that there was no longer a discernible frontier. Frederick Jackson Turner immortalized the census report in his essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner asked a fundamental question: What explained "the peculiarity of American institutions"? His answer was bold, simple, and—after Turner—obvious: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." Turner defined the frontier as "the hither edge of free land . . .

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the line of most rapid and effective Americanization." Turner used the term *frontier* to denote the process of exchange between the continually moving "hither edge of free land" and the national culture and institutions that followed behind it, depositing towns and farms just as "successive terminal moraines result from successive glaciations." The key to the influence—the significance—of the frontier in American history was its continual opportunity and primitivism, which prevented the complete transplantation of European institutions and character traits to North America, and caused American culture instead to develop in unique ways.

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. . . . Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines. And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic and social results of it, is to study the really American part of our history.

Like all historians, Turner sought both to relate the facts of American development and to determine their meaning—in the aggregate, to tell a story. In this way he was doing on a grand scale what all historians attempt: to write history as fact—to tell the truth about the past—and to create history as myth. His efforts at history as fact were sure-footed and competent. The frontier essay capably assesses a wealth of material and summarizes the history of western movement in broad, clear strokes. Turner's efforts at myth, at finding the meaning in the events, were also magnificent. In visionary, sweeping language, he concluded that much of the economic and political development of the United States, as well as the unique character of the American people, derived from the frontier experience of perennial rebirth at "the hither edge of free land." The publication of Turner's paper launched the study of the frontier as an academic field and helped crystallize popular thinking about the importance of the frontier in American life.

A hundred years later, self-doubt and dissension dominate the academic study of the frontier. As the decade of the 1990s opens, students of the American past have yet to come to terms with Turner, the frontier and its meaning. The definition of the field itself generates considerable heat. Turner and his disciples studied the frontier as process, as movement; the West was therefore Kentucky in the 1790s and Oregon in the 1840s. Today several scholars argue that the West must now be studied as a region rather than studying the more amorphous frontier as process. They emphasize the West as a specific region west of the ninety-eighth meridian whose story did not end with the official closing of the frontier in 1890 but continues today as a dynamic and growing part of the nation. They fault Turner for a fuzzy understanding of the facts and importance of region.

An angrier argument arises from the rejection of Turner's historico-mythical thesis of American development. Many historians today fault Turner for failing to be "inclusive." They argue that his focus on economic and political development, his use of masculine language, and his ebullient embrace of the pioneer cause excludes women and minorities and ignores the negative impact of the frontier on these groups. These critics condemn Turner as racist, sexist, anti-environment and generally too positive about the frontier experience. In spite of their rejection of Turner and his vision, however, these historians cannot quite bring themselves to dispense with him—to ignore him altogether—a recognition, by his enemies, of his continuing influence and the popular appeal of his vision.

The persistence of the popular myth about the West is also problematic for the revisionists. The popular West of rugged individualism, self-reliance, and physical challenges, where nature and evil are conquered by people of strong heart and good intentions, runs directly counter to the tenor of our times. Yet even the mythical West has changed in recent years. The landscape is bleaker, the people dirtier, their ideals compromised. Americans are far less sure of their past righteousness and their future direction. Turner, in a similar time of fear and uncertainty, envisioned a past of grandeur and order. There is no such vision today.

What does all of this mean for historians who are charged with the search for the truth about the past? Is it necessary to

reject myth to write truth? Are historians today engaged in the creation of a new western myth to replace the old? Three new books on the frontier provide opportunity to reflect on these crucial issues facing frontier historians. All three books confront the general historiography and the myth of the West, but the authors come to radically different conclusions about the meaning of the frontier and the direction historians must take to find the truth. Glenda Riley, in her book, *The Female Frontier*, concludes that for women the frontier did not matter; gender was the crucial determinant of female lives no matter their time or place. Lillian Schlissel, Byrd Gibbens, and Elizabeth Hampsten analyze family documents in *Far From Home*, and conclude that the frontier was a gothic nightmare of pain, dis-sension, and destitution. In *Growing Up with the Country* Elliott West assesses the experience of childhood on the frontier; he finds the frontier experience to be transformative, for both good and ill.

Glenda Riley has written extensively about women on a variety of American frontiers. In *The Female Frontier* she compares the experiences of women on the midwestern prairie frontier with the lives of women on the Plains frontier a few decades later. The motivation for the book is Riley's belief that women have been neglected in frontier studies. She suggests that Turner and his disciples, who defined the frontier in terms of conquest and economic development, either ignored women or wrote of them only in damaging stereotypes. Popularizers did the same thing, leaving an unconscionable gap in our knowledge and understanding of the real roles and real lives of women. Riley argues that "women did play highly significant and multifaceted roles in the development of the American west" (2). *The Female Frontier* is Riley's evidence that this was so. She discusses a variety of topics in a comparative framework. For example, Riley includes a chapter on domestic life on the prairie and matches it with a similar chapter on the Plains. She then provides a similar pairing for employment, income, and community participation on each frontier. Each chapter provides a wealth of detail about women's lives and introduces a wide variety of new and interesting primary sources.

There is room for doubt about Riley's ultimate interpretation of her research. She concludes that, because women were bound by fairly rigid expectations, where or when they lived had little impact on their lives. Their gender determined their existence. This argument, taken to its logical conclusion, takes women out of history. Time, place, and culture fade into oblivion, leaving gender alone to determine the course of women's lives. But time, place, and culture do alter the context of gender. If they do not, then Turner may have been right to focus on men and not women in his famous essay. Women, according to Riley, were unaffected by the frontier. They contributed their labor, of course, but it was the same labor for the same purpose as elsewhere. Women led determined lives, determined by gender, determined by men. Because Turner focused on change and growth, men would necessarily have been his subject. Riley's approach indicates the hazards of the oppression model of women's history; radical in its rhetoric, it leads inexorably to reactionary conclusions.

A second new book also provides interesting details about people's lives on the frontier wrapped in a troubling interpretation. Lillian Schlissel, Byrd Gibbens, and Elizabeth Hampsten, all professors of English, have each edited a set of family letters or narratives with an eye toward analyzing the impact of the frontier on family life. *Far From Home: Families of the Westward Journey* includes the letters of the Malick family, who migrated to Oregon in 1848; the letters of the Brown family, who lived in Colorado and New Mexico in the last decades of the nineteenth century; and the oral history and memoirs of the Nehers and the Martins, an extended family who lived in North Dakota in the early twentieth century. The primary purpose of *Far From Home* is to demonstrate that the positive frontier of Turner and the populizers of the western myth is a lie. Instead, the frontier was a scene of gothic horrors for individuals as well as the family. It did change people, but not for the better.

The three families pictured in *Far From Home* came from a variety of backgrounds and lived on different frontiers at different times, but they shared a number of characteristics. Primary among them was a sense of dislocation and loss. None of the families got what they expected. The Malicks suffered the

deaths of two sons and the father. The mother of the clan remained in Oregon but never recovered her equilibrium. Her surviving children grew up to lead unstable lives, repeatedly violating Mrs. Malick's code of behavior and moving away from her as early as possible. Lillian Schlissel, the author of this portion of the book, blames the frontier experience for the devastation and alienation in this family. Schlissel does acknowledge that these deaths and dislocations could have happened anywhere, but after mentioning the possibility, she returns to her theme of the destructive gothic frontier.

The Brown family suffered the effects of wanderlust; Charles Brown, a doctor, moved to Colorado from Virginia to find his fortune and to escape his overbearing mother and sisters. He never looked back. After a year and a half he asked his wife and child to join him. Together his family moved from mining camp to mining camp in search of the big rock candy mountain. Charles was profligate; Maggie was brave for the public eye but deeply unhappy in private. They buried six children on their journey. When the opportunity came to return to their native state, they did so, but found that Virginia now disappointed them, and they returned west. The Browns never got rich and never found stability; in fact they appeared to prize instability. "If the myth of the West was fulfillment," Byrd Gibbens writes, "the reality, at least for the Browns, was different" (171). Many of the towns in which they lived are now gone; "the Brown's [*sic*] presence was wiped out, as if they had never been there at all" (171).

For the Nehers and Martins the frontier meant poverty and degradation, at least initially. The families migrated to North Dakota in 1909 from the Odessa Valley in Russia, where they had been part of the German colony invited in by Catherine the Great in the eighteenth century. The two families decided to leave Russia when Germans were subjected to conscription into the Russian army. The wives in the families apparently were reluctant pioneers. The Neher/Martin story is grim. Their journey was difficult; their poverty upon arrival unyielding. The families lived in a boxcar during their first winter and often went hungry. Once spring came they all had to work hard to carve farms from the grasslands. At one point Mr. Martin

bound out his two oldest children to a neighbor in exchange for money for shoes. After ceaseless struggles the families acquired land and some level of comfort. When the depression struck in the 1930s, however, the families lost their lands. Although the families achieved moderate success in the end, Elizabeth Hampsten, the author of this segment, concludes "that for all too many, the settlement experience may well have come to a bitter trade of lives for shoes" (228).

Undoubtedly there was failure and misery on the American frontier. Undoubtedly there were dashed expectations and broken dreams. Any time hopes are unrealistically high, disappointment follows. It is true that traditional approaches to the frontier have not dealt much with individual or even regional failures. Because the overall experience, at least in terms of national growth and power, was positive and successful, the darker side has received less attention. Obviously national success and power is often purchased through individual suffering. Yet to maintain that the frontier experience is responsible for the alienation and dislocation expressed in these collections of letters and memoirs is simplistic. Death can strike at any time in any place; nor were family discord or profligacy unique to the frontier. Many of the family strains reflected in the Neher/Martin story stemmed from their peasant origins. Arranged marriages and the male domination of wives and children were not products of frontier life, but problems that the family imported. The fact that they lost their land in the depression is not the fault of the frontier. Had they stayed in Russia they would have faced the greater rigors of Stalin's terror, which was felt with full force by the German-Russians of the Odessa. Was the fate of the Browns, whose "presence was wiped out, as if they had never been there at all," any more harsh than that of the Puritans of Massachusetts, or the later immigrants who stopped in the tenements of the Northeast, whose remains are buried somewhere under skyscraper tombstones of progress in the settled East? To create a gothic frontier of misery and doubt is to engender yet another myth of the frontier, one less reflective of truth than the original.

The final book, Elliott West's *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier*, comes closer to grappling



with the reality of frontier life. The book gives an enlightening portrait of childhood in the West. It also has much to say about the meaning of the frontier in all its complexity. To Elliott West, the frontier was a transformative place, for good and for ill. The power of the frontier story, he believes, comes from the intersection of ordinary people with an extraordinary place at a unique moment. He focuses on the lives of children because they were important to the development of new regions; their labor helped create a settled world. Children are also important to our understanding of the frontier because, as West says, "they felt the frontier's shaping force most of all" (xix). *Growing Up with the Country* is not all-inclusive; the book explains and analyzes the lives of white, American-born children under the age of fifteen. West chose to limit his study to this group to reduce cultural variables that would obscure the focus on the frontier experience, and because the parents of this group have been the most studied frontier population. His work, he hopes, will demonstrate that new approaches and new questions can invigorate traditional fields.

West carefully analyzes the lives of children using their own words as well as the techniques of sociology and developmental psychology. He finds that children had their own unique perspectives on the land and formed a stronger bond with it than their parents did; they had fewer ties with the world left behind. Children also contributed much to the building of the new world. They were, as West states it, "the frontier's most versatile workers" (98). As they grew, children experienced difficulties and responsibilities on the frontier that made them stronger people and sometimes drew them away from family values and ties. They did not see the frontier as an alien place but as their home. When they experienced the loss of loved ones they did not blame the place as the parents often did. Girls on the frontier faced an especially trying adjustment as they matured; their youth provided liberating possibilities that were often revoked once they reached womanhood and had to return to more limited roles.

West concludes that for children a western childhood meant ambiguity. Their parents struggled to inculcate the values the family had imported, yet the world around them chal-

lenged those values at every turn. The frontier that sometimes pulled families together could also tear them apart. Parents wanted to protect their children, yet gave them adult responsibilities that required them to grow up before their time. "More than anything else, this—a garbling of messages, the push and shove of conflicting influences—set frontier childhood apart" (253).

This theme of ambiguity is the most helpful one as we try to come to terms with our past and understand the impact of the frontier. For many people the frontier did provide opportunity and success. For many other people the frontier meant failure, disappointment, conquest, or death. All people struggled with powerful forces of change and often resisted them with vigor. Turner's vision was not ambiguous. He emphasized the change and innovation, the order and the ultimate success of the frontier. Because he wrote when he did, he was not "inclusive" in a sociological sense. Turner saw Indian peoples as bit players in the American play, and he used masculine language in articulating his vision. Yet he identified themes that remain vital to our national power and strength as well as our national character. He was searching for the broadest possible meaning for our national experience; he found it in the fact and the myth of the frontier. There is no indication that he would have denied the contributions of women, children, or African-Americans; nor is there any sense that he would have denied individual hardships or suffering. Harsh, primitive realities, far from putting the lie to Turner's supposedly benign view of frontier life, are in fact essential to Turner's explanation, in which the primitive conditions of the frontier acted as a continual brake to the development of hierarchical and authoritarian political institutions.

Contemporary authors continue to wrestle with Turner's theory and the meaning of the frontier. For Lillian Schlissel, Byrd Gibbens, and Elizabeth Hampsten, the harsh necessity of the frontier, rather than being a recurring act in a national drama, becomes the whole story. It is abstracted experience, reified and generalized into a literary trope called gothic frontier. Glenda Riley, on the other hand, denies any independent significance to the frontier. It is "mere" place and time, without

causal or experiential significance in the lives of women. Elliott West, like Turner, sees a definite significance to the frontier experience, particularly to the experience of those most susceptible to its molding influence—its children. Indeed, Turner conceptualized the frontier as the formative childhood of the American nation that he addressed in 1893. In so addressing America, Turner established himself as the father of frontier studies. Perhaps, then, the continued and ritualistic attacks on Turner, a hundred years later, are inevitable, for as Oscar Wilde said of parents, "Children begin by loving their parents. After a while they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them."

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